



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 7, 2005

Dear Colleague:

We'd like to share the following article, which appeared in the Washington Post on April 7, 2005, and discusses concerns by leading National Institutes of Health officials regarding the current federal embryonic stem cell policy.

NIH Agency Chiefs Criticize Federal Policy on Stem Cells

By Rick Weiss
Washington Post Staff Writer

Breaking with a tradition of deference to top administration officials, several institute directors at the National Institutes of Health went public yesterday with their distaste for federal restrictions on human embryonic stem cell research.

Their comments, put to paper at the request of Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and disclosed in conjunction with an NIH appropriations hearing yesterday, reflect festering frustration over the policy initiated by President Bush in 2001.

In their written comments and in testimony before the Appropriations subcommittee on the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, chaired by Specter, several NIH officials warned that the agency and the nation could become stragglers in the field as talented researchers move to places where the rules are less strict and funding is more plentiful.

"Progress has been delayed by the limited number of cell lines," wrote Elizabeth G. Nabel, the new director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. "The NIH has ceded leadership in this field."

The science, which aims to develop treatments for a range of diseases using cells from 5-day-old human embryos, stirs controversy because embryos are destroyed in the process. Under the Bush policy, researchers cannot use federal funds to conduct research on stem cells isolated after Aug. 9, 2001. That keeps taxpayers from contributing to embryo destruction but also keeps the federal research enterprise from exploring newer — and in some respects more promising — colonies, or lines, of cells.

This summer, Congress is to consider legislation that would allow federal funding of research using some of the thousands of embryos slated for destruction at fertility clinics — a change the administration has said it opposes and that NIH leaders have until now avoided addressing. But several of them made clear their antipathy for the status quo yesterday.

Nora D. Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, complained that gaining access to the relatively few approved lines of stem cells is "complicated and expensive."

Duane Alexander, director of the Na-

tional Institute of Child Health and Human Development, expressed frustration over "cumbersome procedures and long waiting times" for approved cells, which in the end, he added, are often of poor quality and die easily when they are thawed.

James F. Battey, director of the Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, who until recently was in charge of the agency's task force on stem cells and has made a reputation for being politic in assessing the Bush policy, also was unusually blunt.

"The state of the science is moving very, very rapidly," Battey testified, drawing attention to several new lines of cells developed in Chicago that show special biomedical promise. "These cell lines, however, were all created after August 9th, 2001, and are therefore ineligible for federal funding," said Battey, who has applied for a job with a newly formed California stem cell research institute that promises to fund studies on both old and new lines of cells at many times the current level of federal support.

Perhaps inadvertently, even NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni appeared to give away his personal feelings while testifying before the subcommittee.

"If they're going to be destroyed [anyway], where is the moral issue?" Specter asked Zerhouni, referring to the legislative proposal to allow funding of research on embryos destined to be discarded.

"I think you'll have to ask that from those who hold that view," Zerhouni replied.

The candor with which various institute directors answered Specter's letter may have had something to do with how he asked. In the past, the answers to similar questions were vetted by administration officials in the Department of Health and Human Services, raising Specter's ire.

But the senator's March 24 letter asking for comments from institute directors specifically precluded that. "Your response should be submitted directly to the Subcommittee without editing, revision, or comment by the Department of Health & Human Services," he wrote.

Research editor Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.



Elias A. Zerhouni
 is director of the
 National Institutes of Health.

We are leading the effort in the House of Representatives to expand the current policy, by enabling scientists to study stem cell lines derived ethically since the President's August 9, 2001 decision. The National Institutes of Health should be leading biomedical research in this nation. Our legislation, The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, enables them to do so. Please contact Elizabeth Wenk with Rep. Castle (5-4165) or Meghan Taira with Rep. DeGette (5-4431) to cosponsor the legislation or for more information.

Sincerely,

Mike Castle

Michael N. Castle
 Member of Congress

Diana DeGette

Diana DeGette
 Member of Congress